You Got Your Good Thing and I’ve Got Mine: David Lynch as Queer Artist

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On its surface, a simple question: “Who are you?” Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) asks this of Mystery Man (Robert Blake) in *Lost Highway*, and Betty (Naomi Watts) asks Rita (Laura Harring) the same in *Mulholland Drive*. *Twin Peaks* posed one question (“Who killed Laura Palmer?”), but was more fascinated with asking another: Who *was* Laura Palmer?

“Who are you?” is a relatively pedestrian question that appears across a spectrum of films and other art forms, but in the hands of David Lynch, there’s a peculiar lane he drives that question down, perhaps even somewhat unpredictably given the auteur’s proclivities. Lynch isn’t just interested in the potential and limitation of identity play, but in a core, human feeling of Otherness that is inextricable from queerness. David Lynch is, intentionally or otherwise, a queer artist worthy of being in the ranks of folks like Todd Haynes, Kenneth Anger, the Wachowskis and Cheryl Dunye.

Lynch has a fundamental understanding of the strangeness of sex and eroticism, and his films, even without explicit sex, carry an uncomfortably erotic charge. While *Eraserhead* can be read as a film examining the anxiety of paternal responsibility, the sequences containing the song “In Heaven (Lady in the Radiator Song)” place desire within a plane that stratifies the grotesque and the appealing. The Lady in the Radiator, chalk white and

with cheeks bulbous like a chipmunk, retains a 1950s-reminiscent hairdo and calf-length dress. For Lynch, this desire is off limits, not because of the transgression of familial/marital fidelity, but because of its inconclusive mix of sex appeal and horror. Much of queer desire feels like a navigation of those extremes, and encompasses what it means to endure both.

Lynch perfects this extreme nature in *Mulholland Drive*, using its puzzle structure as both atmosphere and as a series of reflections from a broken heart. Sapphic love is first a play, an act, as Betty and Rita read lines together before the former's audition, performers delivering an artificiality to their roles: That love is allowed to be real if only as a heterosexual pairing and under a hetero gaze. Yet sex and queerness are revealed to be fragile and vulnerable as the film proceeds, Betty and Rita's sex followed by spiritual connection at Club Silencio, where they watch representations of tragic femininity fall away as they sit in the rafters, holding hands. They share this space with one another (Rita donning a blonde wig), and while tears fall down their faces during a Spanish language cover of Roy Orbison's "Crying," they know each other better than they could have imagined, so intimately they almost transcend the physical limitations of their bodies. The blue lighting of Club Silencio literally shimmers as the two clasp hands. A later sex scene is just depressing, a misbegotten masturbation fantasy that imagines the "now" Diane (Watts) as someone craved and wanted in ways she once was. At its center, *Mulholland Drive* is a story of heartbreak.

The question "Who are you?" is sometimes thrown back at the questioner, as in *Lost Highway*, in which Bill Pullman is first Fred Madison, a man who is convicted of the murder of his wife (Patricia Arquette), and then becomes Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty), a stud mechanic still pining after someone who looks quite like Pullman's late wife. There is, again, not merely a masculine anxiety about sexual desire in Lynch's film, but an anxiety about what role that plays in terms of conceptualizing one's identity. Pullman's character is, like Watts in *Mulholland Drive*, two people, driven by the strange and alienating passion for (basically) one person. It's an inability to navigate selfhood and love and desire which lends a queer sensibility to Lynch's work.

In many ways, this kind of alienation from conventional sexuality is fundamental to that work, which expressed not merely a sense of otherness, like in *The Elephant Man*, but a distinct inability to relate with sexuality and desire from a normative heterosexual approach. *Blue Velvet* deconstructs this inability, breaking down the familial unit and transforming it into terror, with Dennis Hopper's Frank Booth as both child and father and Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini) as both mother and love object. Laura Dern's turn as Nikki Grace in *Inland Empire*, Lynch's last completed feature film, also has her wandering film sets and relationship dynamics without a full sense of self, only a sense of her identity

as Hollywood has told it to her.

The town of Twin Peaks accentuates all of these ideas, revealing the limits of tolerance (as Louis in *Angels in America* remarks, “When shit hits the fan, you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing.”) Who Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) was matters as much as what mythology was created about her throughout the town. Her disembodied self in the Red Room that Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) visits in his dreams suggests someone who has experienced severe trauma which has shaped her identity. There is much humor in *Twin Peaks*, and in Lynch’s work in general, but it’s never so off putting as in this context: when the series becomes about a young woman who has fundamentally been shaped by trauma and is then at odds with the world around her.

So frequently, Lynch’s films are read as quasi-investigations into the seedy underbelly of the most mundane existences. I suspect that Lynch films offer potent experiences because the world that seems so strange and so off-kilter is one viewed through the eyes of one othered by society, by someone with access to an understanding of queer identity in some way. Lynch may engage and include queer characters in his films, characters like Betty and Rita and Denise (David Duchovny), but his queer sensibility extends beyond that, and beyond the camp humor of his work. The rest of Lynch’s characters follow the rules of Lynch’s worlds—the audience tries to play along, unable to figure out what exactly is so strange. “Who are you?”: You don’t know how to be who you are in this world, sometimes, so you can’t answer that question. Lynch’s surreality is by its very definition not just weird, but a version of reality that’s augmented, rendered unrecognizable. For queer people, that’s our reality already.